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‘Absent and yet somehow still present’: Representing the Irish Disappeared in contemporary Photography and Fiction

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Witnessing the systematic disappearance of individuals and groups of people brings us face to face with what Saul Friedlander called ‘the limits of representation’.¹ This is because the tactic of disappearing people does not only do violence to the victims but also to their memory and existential status in the world. As José Emilio Burucúa and Nicolás Kwiatkowski have pointed out (referring in particular to the Latin American examples), the ‘very situation of the *desaparecidos* is defined by the fact that their families were not able to identify or bury the corpses of their loved ones’.² They go on to describe how the ‘problem of the limits of representation’ is extremely fraught: the desire for justice and understanding seems to demand revisiting in some way the act of disappearance; but there is no light to illuminate the search and even to speak in general terms ‘could inadvertently reproduce the uniformity which the perpetrator tried to impose upon the victims’.³

Any form of artistic intervention in this area, therefore, faces somber and ethically problematic questions: How to make present (visible, audible) something that has left such a gaping absence in the lives of many individuals? How to present a story that has no ‘known’ story? How to re-present something and somebody who is absent – whose presence was not only silenced but removed? My paper takes as its point of departure the dichotomy, or perhaps rather dialectic, between silence, invisibility and absence on the hand, and presence, and the process of making things heard, sayable, visible, and, thereby somewhat present, on the other hand – questioning to what extent the latter leads to forms of empowerment, and for whom. I want to explore that dichotomy through engagements with and artistic representations of the Irish ‘Disappeared’.

¹ See Saul Friedlander, ‘Introduction’ in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the ‘Final Solution’* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 1992).

² José Emilio Burucúa and Nicolás Kwiatkowski, ‘The Absent Double: Representations of the Disappeared’, *New Left Review* 87 May/June 2014, p. 107.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

In Northern Ireland, the term ‘the Disappeared’ is commonly used to refer to the cases of individuals who were abducted, murdered and secretly buried, mainly by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) (a paramilitary grouping dedicated to the reunification of Ireland through violent means), during the period of violence known as the ‘Troubles’ (c.1969-1998). Although numbers are still uncertain, to date there are seventeen known cases.⁴ Apart from Captain Robert Nairac, an undercover British agent, and Lisa Dorrian, a twenty-five-old girl, all the others were Catholic and often disappeared as part of the IRA’s internal ‘policing’ system.

In the wake of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement of 1998, the bereavement counselling group WAVE set up a confidential telephone number to attain information on the Disappeared. At the same time, an IRA spokesperson acknowledged to the republican newspaper *An Phoblacht* that the organisation secretly killed and buried ‘a small number of people’ in the 1970, and promised to set up a special unit to trace the burial sites of the bodies.⁵ In 1999, the IRA, then, issued a statement that contained an apology and the names of nine victims disappeared by its members, together with information on their approximate burial sites. This led, in turn, to the establishment of the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims’ Remains (ICLVR) by a treaty between the Irish and British governments, that provided *de-facto* amnesty for those giving information on what became known as the ‘Sites of the Disappeared’. To date, thirteen bodies have been recovered – most recently, the bodies of Séamus Wright and Kevin McKee are believed to have been discovered at Coghalstown, Co Meath, in June 2015 (almost 43 years after their abduction) during searches looking for the remains of Joe Lynskey,⁶

The Disappeared, then, by definition, denote invisibility and silence – and in that way the landscape of their legacies is particularly difficult to negotiate because it is a landscape without landmarks. In his photographic collection of the burial sites of the

⁴ See The Disappeared of Northern Ireland website, available at: www.thedisappearedni.co.uk/about/, accessed on 18 July 2015).

⁵ BBC News, ‘Timeline: The Disappeared’, 5 November 2014: www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-24812052 (assessed 5 August 2015).

⁶ Tim O’Brien, ‘Bodies of Séamus Wright and Kevin McKee believed found’, *The Irish Times*, 27 June 2015. Available at www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/bodies-of-séamus-wright-and-kevin-mckee-believed-found-1.2265431; accessed on 17 July 2015.

Disappeared, David Farrell notes: 'In thirty years of Northern Ireland's conflict and atrocity a small group of people stood apart: they were the 'missing', the 'disappeared' – absent and yet somehow still present.'⁷ As 'absent presences', they haunt the peace process: their legacy remains one of the most emotive and unsettling of the many issues that remain unresolved from the conflict. This was recently underscored with the controversy surrounding the arrest of Sinn Féin leader, Gerry Adams, in connection with the disappearance of Jean McConville in 1972, with some commentators and politicians arguing that it had the potential to destabilise the peace process itself.⁸

The 'absent presence' of the Disappeared intimates their subaltern status – they are ultimately voiceless and mute, unable to tell their stories or represent themselves politically or epistemologically.⁹ This is emphasised by the silencing that has taken place in the aftermath of their disappearance – which has, in turn, rendered the victim's families voiceless, silent, and mute. Sandra Peake, CEO of WAVE Trauma Centre, who works with the families of the Disappeared, recognises this:

I soon discovered that the issue of The Disappeared was, by and large, hidden and there were multiple levels of silence at all levels of the community. Silence sometimes without the family, silence within the neighbourhood, silence within the church, silence within the community, silence in the work environment, silence at a governmental level with this silence compounded by an underlying fear which stopped families from speaking out.¹⁰

For the families, who have suffered and endured the disappearances of their loved ones, storytelling has been an important means to counter this silence – both at a

⁷ See David Farrell, 'The Disappeared – A Brief History', in *Innocent Landscapes* (Stockport: Dewi Lewis Publishing, 2001), non-paginated.

⁸ See, for example, Shaun Woodward, 'Gerry Adams' arrest shows it's time to deal with Northern Ireland's past', *The Guardian*, 5 May 2014. Available at <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/may/05/gerry-adams-arrest-northern-ireland-good-friday> (accessed on 23 August 2015); Keith Perry, Tom Whitehead and Ben Farmer, 'Gerry Adams arrested over 1972 murder of Jean McConville', *The Telegraph*, 30 April 2014: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/northernireland/10799940/Gerry-Adams-arrested-over-1972-murder-of-Jean-McConville.html> (assessed 30 June 2015).

⁹ See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern speak? [1988].', In *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, eds. Patrick Williams & Laura Chrisman (Harvester: Wheatsheaf, 1994), pp. 66-111.

¹⁰ WAVE Trauma Centre, *The Disappeared of Northern Ireland's 'Troubles'* (Belfast: WAVE Trauma Centre Publications, 2012), p.1.

private and public level. A powerful example of this was when, in 1998, Margaret McKinney spoke at a meeting with President Bill Clinton so movingly of her son, Brian, who had been disappeared over 20 years ago, that the President asked his special Northern Ireland Envoy to assist families in their search.¹¹

Arguably, all art has the potential to make something or someone that is absent 'present' and thereby interrupt and restructure. For Jacques Rancière, 'Art' denotes the sense that is placed on things – or events, or people. It is, he writes, 'a specific form of visibility that puts them [the technical achievement of performing, playing music, painting and so on] in common and frames, out of their linkage, a specific sense of community'.¹² In other words, art consists of and constitutes meaning-giving: it reconfigures accepted wisdom, reinterprets received meanings, and reorganises given orders. Rancière argues that these orders come into being through what he terms 'the distribution of the sensible' (*le partage du sensible*), namely, 'the system of divisions and boundaries that define, amongst other things, what is visible and audible within a particular aesthetico-political regime'.¹³ This boundary-drawing or bordering of what is visible or sayable within particular situations is maintained through what he calls 'the police' – in other words, carefully prescribed norms and rules that constitute who has a voice, what is constituted as meaningful and who or what is actually visible. Essentially, this is to do with power and the ability to include or exclude on the basis of knowledge.¹⁴

For Rancière, the politics of aesthetics lies in the capacity of art to challenge the boundaries of what can be said, thought, heard or done in a given social order: 'Politics is aesthetic in that it makes visible what had been excluded from a perceptual field, and in that it makes audible what used to be inaudible'.¹⁵ In creating a 'new' distribution of sensibility art does not end in 'a deconstruction of the metaphysics of

¹¹ Monica McWilliams, 'Foreword' in *ibid*, p. vii.

¹² Jacques Rancière, 'Contemporary art and the politics of aesthetics', in *Communities of Sense: Rethinking Aesthetics and Politics*, edited by Beth Hinderliter, William Kaizen, Vered Maimon, Jaleh Mansoor and Seth McCormick (London: Duke University Press, 2009), p. 31.

¹³ Gabriel Rockhill, 'Translator's Introduction' to Rancière's *The Politics of the Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2004), p.1.

¹⁴ For an introduction to Rancière's thought see Samuel A. Chambers, *The Lessons of Rancière* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) or Jean-Phillipe Deranty, ed., *Jacques Rancière: Key Concepts* (Durham, Acumen, 2010).

¹⁵ Rancière, Jacques, *The Philosopher and His Poor* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1983), p. 226.

truth and language'. Instead, his concern with what he terms 'sensibility' points to how artists engage with and produce new meanings from the 'un-sayable' and the 'un-representable' through images and words that always, he avers, exceed containment.¹⁶ This new meaning-creation is itself, of course, a regime of sensibility (and, in one meaning of the original French, *sensitivity*) but it creates new spatial opportunities for rethinking or thinking anew. Artistic intervention, essentially, is a form of displacement – a disruption of one order of sensibility and the creation of a new dispensation. It is about the unveiling of power structures that create and maintain regimes of understanding but also the reversal and undoing of those logics. Displacement, then, in a Rancièrian sense denotes not loss or silencing or substitution, but an invocation and revocation of meaning and the possibility not of foreclosure but of moving forward with loss.

If Burucúa and Kwiatkowski point to the dilemmas that artists face when confronted with cases of disappearance, then Rancière reveals how those may be circumvented while maintaining the dignity of the individuals and families concerned. In the rest of this paper I wish to explore how two of Northern Ireland's leading artistic practitioners – the photographer David Farrell and the novelist David Park – have tried to negotiate this intensely problematic territory with differing results. Both Farrell's *Innocent Landscapes* and Park's *The Truth Commissioner* tackle the question outlined by Burucúa and Kwiatkowski in relation to how to approach the subaltern silence of the Disappeared without contributing to its reproduction. I suggest that Park and Farrell are particularly instructive in this regard precisely because of how they engage with the necessary displacement of the referent of the Disappeared. In Farrell's case, the displacement is foregrounded as his images focus on the absences of victims' remains within landscapes or, more precisely, on the displacement of those remains in and by nature and the erasure that results from being hidden. While Park's novel revolves around the case of a disappeared 15-year-old, Connor Walshe, his fictionalization choices both draw on and conflate the individual cases of the Disappeared. Furthermore, his emphasis on the play between peace and truth works to focus on the mechanics of truth recovery as distinct from the Disappeared themselves and their relations, who are given very much a secondary, supporting role in the

¹⁶ Jean-Phillipe Deranty, 'Regimes of the arts', in *Jacques Rancière: Key Concepts*, p. 129.

novel. A close reading of the two interventions thus draws attention to issues of displacement and reference. Whereas the people-less landscapes of Farrell's photographs of the excavation sites of the Disappeared speak directly to an absence – that is, an absence of particular individuals – Park's novel arguably populates these deserted landscapes with the drama of what might be called truth-within-politics. If Park's focus is essentially political, then Farrell's is ethical, focused as it is on individual absences. However, I argue that by paying close attention to what displacement consists of, we can begin to understand our own levels of engagement as readers and viewers. In other words, I argue that Park and Farrell's treatment of the referent of the Disappeared sheds light on the limitations of representation and the mechanisms that reproduce silence. I suggest that exploring that treatment also points to the potential of critical empathy with egregious absence.

David Farrell's *Innocent Landscapes*

David Farrell's *Innocent Landscapes*¹⁷ engages us in the process of disappearance and point to the problem of recovery by showing us images of the excavations for the secret graves of nine of the Disappeared at seven sites in the Republic of Ireland. His photographs remind us of the violence involved in the disappearance of innocent victims by juxtaposing the sublime beauty and seeming innocence of the Irish landscape with the violation effected by the excavations. Speaking of his first visit to Colgagh, County Sligo, in 1999, Farrell emphasizes the contrast between the idyllic rural scene and the destruction caused by the searches:

The first thing I noticed was how the field seemed almost violated; rough tyre tracks; group of rocks piled here and there; a solitary silver birch tree abandoned on its side, its roots holding onto that circle of earth which had once held it firmly in place.¹⁸

¹⁷ First exhibited in Actes Sud in Arles (France) in July 2001, the photographs went on to win the prestigious European Publishers' Award for Photograph.

¹⁸ David Farrell, 'Introduction' to *Innocent Landscapes* (Stockport: Dewi Lewis Publishing, 2001), non-paginated.

His photographs emphatically bear witness to the traces of these violations – the deracinated trees, splintered branches, and dug-up fields, which, as Mark Phelan notes, ‘appear almost as wounds on the landscape.’¹⁹

The images are all from different parts of the Southern Republic but draw attention to the (absent) Northern Irish Troubles. Given that the Disappeared were individuals who were (mostly) abducted from the city (Belfast) and brought for secret burial in the country, urban violence and criminality are implicitly present in these representations of a pristine countryside, corrupting and scarring it. As Alfred Hickling remarks in his review of the exhibition, these images ‘would be postcard-perfect picnic spots if we were not aware of their status as crime locations.’²⁰ Several of Farrell’s photos emphasise the fact that we are effectively confronting a crime scene by foregrounding the police cordon that cuts through the landscape and delineates the area that could possibly contain the unmarked grave. While the cordons work, on the one hand, to exclude us, making us passive observers who have arrived at the scene too late, on the other hand, they also draw us in, sparking ‘a detective impulse in the viewer’, as Colin Graham suggests.²¹ The ethical impetus of Farrell’s images is to compel us to look for, to try to detect, the absent presences, the unheard stories, and untold narratives to which his photographs bear witness.

His photographs foreground the displacement of the Disappeared by tracing the layers of absence and presence that result from this process, forcing our attention to this tension through the book’s very structuring. Each of its seven sections is dedicated to a specific site and opens with a double page that confronts us with pure presences: on the left hand side, we find a dawn or dusk image of the site, notable by its impressionistic blue colour scale; on the right hand, a reproduction of a magnified, annotated ordinance survey map that indicates the approximate burial site. The juxtaposition of these romantic panoramas with the detailed specificity of the map-excerpts creates distance and proximity at the same time. But despite its pristine

¹⁹ Mark Phelan, ‘Not So *Innocent Landscapes*: Remembrance, Representation, and the Disappeared’, in P Anderson & J Menon (eds), *Violence Performed: Local Roots and Global Routes of Conflict* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 285-316, p. 289.

²⁰ Alfred Kicklin, Review of ‘Innocent Landscapes’, *The Guardian*, 7 June 2003, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2003/jun/07/art.artsfeatures> (assessed 13 June 2015).

²¹ Colin Graham, *Northern Ireland: 30 Years of Photography* (Belfast: Belfast Exposed/The MAC, 2013), p.166.

beauty, there is something foreboding in the ambiguous twilight setting of the landscape. Equally, while the map promises us a sense of location, the extreme magnification ultimately creates dislocation and the feeling of displacement.

The following double page then zooms in to the site by daylight and draws our attention, instead, to absences: devoid of humans as such,²² the right-side image points to traces of human presences, mostly in the form of commemorative shrines – composed of or containing a cross, rosary beads, prayer cards, a statue of the Virgin Mary, flowers – or marks left by the search-teams – such as the yellow police cordon, disturbed vegetation, unearthed debris and stones. Those traces work as reminders of those who will remain absent, the Disappeared, who can only seemingly be made present by their name that is inscribed on the opposite page, and works as a displacement of their real presence. The ethical effect is a call for remembrance as recognition: Farrell’s photographs stand as sites of memory, what Pierre Nora calls *lieu de memoire*, ‘where memory crystallises and secretes itself’.²³

The gradual process of their disappearance and displacement is perhaps best captured in Farrell’s series of images of what he calls ‘The Swallowing Tree’: they capture the transitional process in which a tree at Coghalstown Wood, Wilkinstown (where searches for the bodies of Kevin McKee and Seamus Wright took place), which was used by family members as a shrine, is slowly ‘swallowing’ the prayer card and rosary beads that were pinned to its bark.²⁴ Farrell describes the complicity of this process with ‘the killers’ original intention of nature erasing traces, but also nature attempting to heal through growth through cycles of life and death.’²⁵ He explains:

In and of itself this swallowing is a powerful metaphor for all my work on the *Disappeared* – a memory being slowly subsumed by voracious nature and the

²² The only human beings that are pictured in *Innocent Landscapes* are Margaret McKinney, mother of Brian, whose gaze is fixed on her son’s shrine, and a man, presumably her husband, who we only see in turned-away profile, both providing a ‘counterpoint’ to the camera’s ‘expectant gaze into the violated landscape’, as Farrell notes in his blog with *Source: Photographic Review* (see <http://source.ie/blog/>). The image appears at the opening of the book, preceding the section on Colgagh.

²³ Pierre Nora, ‘Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire’, *Representations* vol. 26, 1989, pp. 7-24, p. 7.

²⁴ David Farrell, ‘The Swallowing Tree’, *LANDSCAPEStories* ‘Trees’ July 2012, available at: <http://www.landscapestories.net/issue-07/021-david-farrell?lang=en> (assessed 26 July 2013).

²⁵ Ibid.

passage of time. And yet at the same time its protrusion proclaims a small act of defiance, a punctum of remembrance in opposition to concealment in an isolated wood in County Meath.²⁶

Aware of the threat of memory 'disappear[ing] irretrievably' or 'becoming a tool of the ruling classes', as Walter Benjamin cautions in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Farrell's photographs seize hold of these 'punctums of remembrance'.²⁷ They make some way towards telling the stories of the traumatic disappearances of the Disappeared precisely by attesting to their absence and displacement by and in nature, drawing attention to the almost literal mechanism of silence-making: the isolated country road, for example, down which a body has been driven from its urban location to be dumped or buried recalls the problem alluded to by Ariel Dorfman in regard to disappearance: namely, we cannot mourn that which we don't know is dead.²⁸

²⁶ Ibid. The term *punctum* derives from the vocabulary of Roland Barthes, as detailed in his key study of photography, *Camera Lucida* (London: Vintage, 2000), in which Barthes differentiates between the *studium* of a photograph, that is 'a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment ... but without special acuity', and its *punctum* (meaning wound, prick, mark): the element which breaks (or punctuates) the *studium* as it 'rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces [the observer]'. For Barthes, 'a photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)' (p. 26-7).

²⁷ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn (London: Pimlico, 1999), p. 247.

²⁸ Maya Jaggi, 'Profile: Ariel Dorfman: Speaking for the Dead', *The Guardian*, 14 June 2013: <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2003/jun/14/theatre.fiction> (assessed 1 August 2015).



Figure 1: Image of the prayer card and rosary beads being swallowed by the 'Swallowing Tree' (photograph by author, April 2013).

David Park's *The Truth Commissioner*

Park's novel can be seen to populate the deserted landscapes of Farrell's images, inscribing them with fictional narratives that are not explicitly there. *The Truth Commissioner* hinges on the 'absent presences' that *Innocent Landscapes* trace: it concerns the case of one of the Disappeared, but conflates the stories of the actual Disappeared through the fictional character of the fifteen-year-old Connor Walshe, which is brought before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that is accorded the central role and focus in Park's novel. The novel opens with a chapter, entitled 'Beginnings', that depicts Connor's abduction from his point of view, thus telling a story that precedes Farrell's photographs. It ends with description of a pristine innocent landscape that is disrupted by the arrival of a digger, in a chapter called 'Endings'. The heterogeneity signalled by the choice of plural here rubs rather uneasily against the suggestion of temporal closure, and belies that what we are given is really only *one* beginning and ending: the imminent murder of Connor and the

eventual recovery of his body. Nonetheless, it also suggests that his is really just one of the multiple cases of the 'Disappeared'.

Notably, the remainder of Park's novel focuses neither on Connor's story nor his family's experiences and suffering but his disappearance becomes in the book the starting point for four different stories to unfold. These narratives concern that of Henry Stanfield, the truth commissioner of the novel's title, who finds himself obliged to investigate his case; Francis Gilroy, the ex-IRA senior involved in his disappearance who is now occupying the role of Minister for Children and Culture; the retired RUC detective James Fenton who used Connor as an IRA informer; and another former IRA volunteer, Michael Madden alias Danny, who was involved in his abduction and has subsequently immigrated to the US to start a new life there.

In a way, then, the stories of these four middle-aged men displace those of Connor and his family. This is accentuated by the fact that the three men involved in Connor's death would much rather forget and erase the past, which sits in clear contrast to his family's need and desire to find out 'the truth' about what really happened to him. Initially, Park's novel reads as structurally composed of four separate stories about the everyday concerns, regrets, and fears of those four men; each strand abruptly ending at the close of the chapter with the next opening with the narrative of a different character. Eventually, the different strands begin to merge within the individual chapters at the beginning of the hearing of Connor's case in front of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). While Stanfield remains notably cynical about the whole proceedings, neither of the other men appears voluntarily or wants to be involved: being called or forced to appear in front of the TRC disrupts for each the precarious sense of normality, safety and comfort that he sought to construct in the aftermath of the Troubles, especially around his paternal role, and forces him to recall his own involvement with and responsibility towards Connor.²⁹ Even during the hearings, it is their thoughts, voices and stories that dominate the narration; but the TRC also finally allows a voice to the victims to tell their (side of the) story: so we do not only hear the story of his disappearance through the words of his sister Maria but,

²⁹ For a more detailed discussion of masculinity and paternity in Park's novel, see Stefanie Lehner, 'Post-Conflict Masculinities: Filiative Reconciliation in *Five Minutes of Heaven* and David Park's *The Truth Commissioner*', *Irish Masculinities: Critical Reflections on Literature and Culture*, eds. Caroline Magennis and Raymond Mullen (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2011), 65-76.

when the advocate of the victim's family produces a tape-recording of Connor's interrogation just before his death, he is empowered to tell his own story. His previously unheard voice – literally from beyond the grave – has a powerful impact, not only on the four men, who as a result of hearing it, feel impelled to speak their truths, but also on the audience:

The voice beats against the walls of the chamber like some moth trapped in a tremble of confusion and looking for release. Stanfield looks down on the listeners and sees their eyes drop to the floor as a kind of collective embarrassed shame settles on the room because they're listening to the voice of a boy who's about to die and they know that their presence intrudes even all these years later and that their place should be taken by a priest or his family, someone, anyone, who will put a hand on his shoulder and tell him that everything will be all right. They want the tape to stop.³⁰

His disembodied voice seems here to take on an agency of his own – drawing attention to his spectral absent presence, which, in turn, questions the presence of the listeners. His displaced voice seems to trigger what Dominick LaCapra calls 'emphatic unsettlement' in the listeners. LaCapra describes this as involving 'a kind of virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other's position while recognising the difference of that position and hence not taking the other's place'.³¹ In Park's novel, Connor's voice triggers not only empathy from his audience; it also unsettles them to such an extent that they would like to reproduce the initial silencing that has muted his story.

Significantly, this is also the fate that awaits the TRC in Park's story. Park's novel emphasises the political ramifications of the coming to voice of such unheard stories: after the hearing of Connor's case, the Commission's archives are set on fire. Stanfield notes: 'There'll be an inquiry of course and for the rest of their bitter, corrosive history each side will blame the other'.³² Arguably, this will mark the end of the operations of the TRC. Just as the fire engulfs the Truth Commission, so too

³⁰ David Park, *The Truth Commissioner* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008), p. 328.

³¹ Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2011), p. 78.

³² Park, *The Truth Commissioner*, p. 369.

individual stories become displaced under self-sustaining communal narratives. Stanfield, who remained notably critical of the cathartic effects of truth-telling, seems the only one who, as he remarks, ‘understands that sometimes the angel troubling the water might only darken the swirling pool of the past’.³³ The eponymous truth commissioner refers here to the Biblical image that provides the novel’s epigraph about the healing powers of the waters of Bethesda, which are ‘troubled’ by an angel in order to make people ‘whole’ (Gospel of St John) and which are in the novel explicitly associated with truth-speaking.³⁴ What is commonly neglected in readings of Park’s novel is that the passage which is chosen as its epigraph is only a prologue to the story that follows, which is of how Jesus heals a man who has been waiting at the waters for the angel, who then testifies against Jesus, precipitating the conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities. In other words, Jesus’ intervention unleashes severe political consequences. It is thus notable that the ending of the novel entails comparable ramifications. Park’s novel ends in a note of what might be called cynical realism. Mirroring its epigraph, the novel itself remains open-ended – a prologue to unarticulated subsequent events. Connor’s body is being excavated but, through the character of Stanfield, Park is noncommittal about the outcomes.

Park and Farrell’s engagements with the *Disappeared* can be read as forms of memory-work. The primary concern of Park’s award-winning novel circles around the issue of truth versus justice; in particular, the question of how peace can be consolidated in a society grappling with demands for truth about the violence that marred its past. In contrast, the people-less landscapes of Farrell’s photography speak directly to an absence – that is, an absence of particular individuals. In other words, whereas Park’s focus is essentially societal, Farrell’s is on the individual. This can be seen most clearly in the centrality of what might be called the process of truth recovery in Park’s novel. Here mourning occurs as a way of working through politically difficult issues – the drama, as such, in the novel stems from the expediency involved in balancing that process with the ever-present possibility that it can be destabilized. Farrell’s engagement is one step closer to what might be termed the actuality of the *Disappeared*. Thus, Park dramatizes the political and juridical issues posed by what might be seen as a most-difficult-case (namely, concerning the

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 368-9.

³⁴ See, for instance, *ibid.* p. 246.

Disappeared) by working at two levels removed from the actuality of disappearance: the absence of a definitive story, plus the imposition of a fictionalized narrative that in large part works as a composite of several individual stories. The paradox within Farrell is that the very absence of individuals represents a close connection with his referent – namely, the individuals who were disappeared. In this instance, the past is not simply something that can be dealt with through a process of coming to terms or even justice or truth. Rather, it is very present as that which is not in each of his images.

Rancière refers to the Burkean ‘paradox’ that ‘words are always more appropriate than images for translating all grandeur – sublimity or horror – which exceeds the measure ... because they spare us from having to *see* what they *describe*’³⁵. In engaging with the referent of disappearance both Park and Farrell work with that excess of imagination: because their subject is essential a non-subject and their referent a non-referent, they are forced to conjure through words and photography this absence into presence. Park’s concern with what was in the second half of the first decade of the twenty-first century, arguably, a central question within Northern Irish politics – namely, truth recovery and the embedding of peace and stability – works, however, to displace the issue of disappearance. In other words, the essentially political confrontation over the exigencies and demands of peace serves as a dramatic hook that obscures the initial injustice and absence – namely, the treatment of Connor by the adult men. Farrell’s images work to interrogate the question concerning the limitation of representation at what may be seen as one level of displacement: the corrosive effect of burial and absence. His images testify to Rancière’s notion that images of violence and injustice ‘cannot reproduce what has disappeared. [They] must do something else, indeed two things simultaneously: Both show the effacing of the traces and give the floor to witnesses and historians to reconstitute with words the logic of the disappearance accomplished on the ground’.³⁶ In other words, Farrell’s images testify to a double excess: the excess involved in the limitations of representing absence and disappearance and the excess involved in recreating new meanings and inviting new engagements with those wounds.

³⁵ Jacques Rancière, ‘Is cinema to blame?’, in *Chronicles of Consensual Times* (London: Continuum, 2010), p.42.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 41.